

ORIGINALITY IN ART, NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL

Paintings by Twachtman; Miss Thayer's Portraits

By Royal Cortissoz

ONCE in a blue moon an exhibition turns up that is a pure joy. Such an exhibition is that which has been arranged at the Macbeth gallery of paintings by the late John H. Twachtman, the property of his widow and estate. There are eighteen examples, early and late, and they make a collection of extraordinary interest. Twachtman was a born painter, which is to say that he had in him at the outset the principle of growth, so that his works are not to be divided into good and bad, weak and strong, according to period, but have, at whatever stage of his development they appear, a certain vitality apart from other questions of merit or demerit. It is always so with the genuine artist. Every great painter springs, in a sense, full armed from the brow of Jove. In the earliest of Michael Angelo's drawings there is the germ of the Sistine ceiling. But it is perceptible in the shape of accent, gesture, atmosphere. You feel the prophecy of great things to come not in any very definite way, but rather in the broad sense of power conveyed. It is this stamp of potency, fascinating by itself to any connoisseur, that made Twachtman a notable figure even before he achieved his full fame. It was often possible to criticize his work, adversely, and sometimes to deplore lapses in him from the standard which he had beaten out for himself. It was never possible to ignore him.

In the excellent little catalogue pre-

pared for this show it is a pity that space was not found for the brief biographical note which would have served to clarify somewhat the sharp contrast on the walls between Twachtman in his formative period and Twachtman in his prime. The character of his earlier work is better understood when we recall that he began his studies in Cincinnati (where he was born, in 1853), getting his training under Frank Duveneck, and then, in 1875, proceeding to Munich. All this explains his addiction as a young man to what we must call the studio tradition, which ordains that nature shall be painted in a gray north light and that it shall be brought within the compass of a well-balanced type of pictorial design. Saturate yourself in that tradition, seeing nothing else, and as a landscape painter, at all events, you are in peril. Your impressions of nature sooner or later become juiceless and pallid. Your pattern remains only pattern. Not so was it with Twachtman. We are not of those who make a cult of his art, finding every fragment of it beautiful, and staunchly as we believe in the genuine artistic interest of his earlier works we value them as foreshadowings rather than for their own sake. And some of them are merely banal, as witness "The Valley" or the "Meadow Brook."

He shed the purely factitious side of the studio tradition very rapidly, retaining from Duveneck's teaching all that was sound and carrying over nothing from it that was alien to his spontaneous, wholesomely human talent. Mr. Hassam, in a brief note prefixed to the catalogue, speaks as having always been impressed by his friend's "great beauty of design." It is the right phrase. Only we would underline the "beauty." Twachtman achieved good design largely for the reason at which we have already glanced, because he received a rigorous training. He raised it to a higher power because he had a passion for beauty. This is the element in his work which manifestly enkindles it and holds it together. We remember how at the great exposition in San Francisco three or four years ago the room dedicated to Twachtman carried off all the honors, wearing a distinction which no other individual exhibit could quite claim. It fairly exhaled character, and this not because of any towering technical superiority, but because the pictures in it were all so alive with a beauty as original and delicate as it was unmistakable. Follow the rough sequence provided by the present exhibition and you will see how easily his preeminence is explained. He begins by knowing his trade, painting in all the earlier, cooler, more conventional landscapes a type of picture that is beautiful in composition and truthful into the bargain. Then, as



SUMMER

—From the painting of J. H. Twachtman, at the Macbeth Gallery.

of the lover of nature and beauty who sees new combinations in every landscape problem he attacks.

It is interesting to observe the variety in this exhibition. The chronological nature of the collection in itself offers a challenge on the point. One may compare the young Twachtman, painting his "Blue Jay" with a Duveneck-

the technical virtuoso. And in, perhaps, the greatest of the three, the splendid "Summer," he is the master of landscape art in something like the grand style, planning a big scene, defining his ground forms in a broad, bold manner, and enveloping them in an atmosphere, with a stroke that we would call panoramic if it were not for the note of intimacy which here, as always with this artist, has a way of creeping in.

It was, after all, the imaginative interpreter in him that had the last word. Throughout his many moods he was faithful to his feeling, for whatever in nature was dainty, elusive, tenderly charming. We wish a few of his pastels of flowers could have been included. They expressed perhaps the most fragile sentiment in the scale through which he ranged over the poetic, more evanescent side of nature. One or two of his cascade pictures are shown, interesting things, which reveal his characteristics for such fugitive magic as may be pursued through tumbling waters, but the problem in this case was a shade too baffling—he rarely solved it with complete success. The "Horseshoe Falls," the better of the two canvases to which we refer, is a pleasant picture without being one of his triumphs. But we end as we began, not caring overmuch whether a given picture of Twachtman's is a complete triumph or what may be termed, for the sake of the distinction, a lesser achievement. In any case, it is always a vivid, personal impression, original and true. He was only forty-nine when he died, seventeen years ago. American art has never suffered a more regrettable loss.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred artistic inheritance means artistic blight. The painter following in his father's footsteps is generally lost amid the enfeebling allurements of stereotyped imitation. But now and then the parent passes on his gift free from all impediments; it is developed in the disciple of his hearthstone, not as a technical habit or a point of view, but simply as an impulse toward beauty. This is what has happened in the transmission of Mr. Abbott Thayer's inspiration to his daughter Gladys, who has an exhibition of flower studies and portraits at the Knoedler gallery. She left an impression of healthy independence in the collection of landscapes, sea pieces and portraits which she brought forward at the same place about two years ago, but we can see now that she was making then only rather tentative affirmations. To-day she asserts her full pretensions as an artist, and justifies them with amazing aplomb. Of the flower studies we can say nothing more appreciative than that if Twachtman were alive he would be among the first to applaud them. They exert much the same sort of spiritual enchantment which he commanded, reproducing all the frail, swaying beauty of delicate blooms, and with it the mysterious charm which we signify when we talk about "the soul of a flower." Alone these would make a welcome little exhibition. Nevertheless, it is in the portraits that Miss Thayer's artistic stature is most impressively disclosed.

Two years ago we found her taking

a hint from her father in the decorative plan of one or two of her portraits. Now all that allies her with him is the great central virtue of her work, a virtue as independently her own as it is his, the virtue of intensity of conception. Her portraits are magnificently felt. The first suggestion they make is that she has apprehended her sitter with the faculty of the true portrait painter, not only accurately, but finely, emotionally, with a poignantly artistic divination of precisely what to record and what to omit. When an artist has so firm a grasp as this upon the fundamentals of his problem it is odds that he will keep pace, in respect to technique and style, quite as a matter of course. And quite artlessly, too. There are some things here which in spite of their merit seem a little stiff and self-conscious. Such an admirable yet repellent portrait is the "Michael Stillman," early in date, and perhaps from its very youthfulness taking on too much of the meretricious air of the *tour de*

force, in her best work Miss Thayer hasn't the faintest savor of this artificiality. She proceeds rather with the unconscious fluency of the experienced craftsman. Her portraits of her father and of Mr. Raphael Pumpelly are no less spontaneous in spirit than they are capable, adequate, in form. When this artist made her first appearance we remarked that further performances of hers would be awaited with interest. We may repeat this observation, adding that it would now seem as if almost anything were possible in the development of her art. She has executive adroitness, already as much as she needs, and where the more recordable matters are concerned, as regards style, feeling for beauty, quality, it is plain that she has unusual resources.

The advocates of this half-baked kind of art will assert, of course, that those who do not care for it are blind to its "secret." This is worse than impertinence. It is pure insolence. The burden of proof lies with the modernist. One does not need to be a dipsomaniac in order to revolt against the substitution of vinegar for wine. Any one with a palate can tell the difference. There are no Eleusinian mysteries into which it is necessary to be inducted before one can penetrate to the true character of Mr. Sheeler's barns, or Mr. Davies's nudes, or Mr. Weber's jejune drawings of misshapen models. There is no key to be laboriously acquired before we can unlock the secret of Mr. Hartley's show at the Daniel gallery, where two or three mildly promising landscapes, agreeable in color, are the sole points of relief in a welter of boredom. The trouble with the modernist is simply a refusal to play the game, to employ the rudiments of art in the making of a picture, and while making this refusal he pretends that the crudities and eccentricities which he substitutes are the hallmarks of originality. Sometimes, as in the case of Mr. Davies, who can draw and paint like an angel if he wishes, he makes the choice out of sheer perversity. But, as a rule, we believe, the modernist is a modernist because he cannot help himself, because he doesn't know how to produce a genuine work of art by recognized methods.

There was begun yesterday at the American Art Galleries an exhibition of modern paintings collected by the late John W. Sterling and the paintings and other art property brought together by the late Governor Oliver Ames of Massachusetts. These things will be sold in two sessions at the Plaza Hotel, the Ames collection being scheduled for January 16 and the Sterling pictures being disposed of on the following evening.

The Ehrlich gallery announces an exhibition of "Unusual Paintings by Old Masters." It will continue during the present month.

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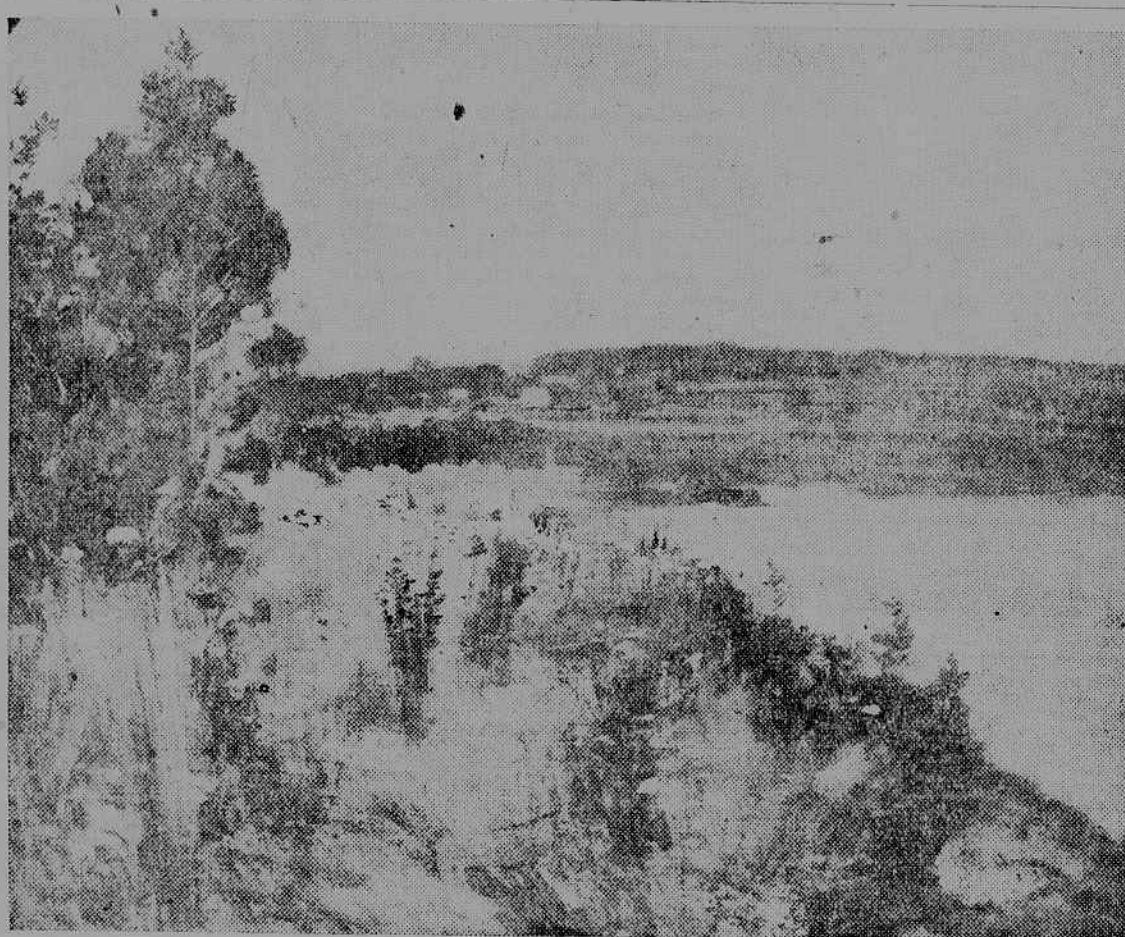
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THE RIVER

—From the painting of J. H. Twachtman, at the Macbeth Gallery.

But look, on the other hand, at "The River" and the "Argue de Bataille," or at the "Gray Jay," which we would surmise to be somewhat later than either of these, and get is informed by the same spirit. It is the spirit of the Salon, which can be helpful when it spells mere mechanical picture making, but which can be delightful when it smells the easy, free mastery of the mechanics of picture-making. That is what marks Twachtman in his first

time goes on, and he discovers the possibilities in the impressionism of Claude Monet, the new refinements of atmosphere, the subtler nuances of light and color, he discovers himself also and finds that with this more flexible method he can give fuller expression to his instinctive predilections. He no longer paints Salon pictures. He paints Twachtmans, and that not in the vein of the popular success, who repeats himself, but in the vein

ish solicitude for closeness of modeling, solidity of color and the sensuous quality of rich pigment, with the older man seeking a diaphanous texture in "From the Holly House" or playing with the shimmering opalescence of the "Niagara." The reader will notice, however, that we are reckoning here with modifications of methods. The important point to observe where Twachtman's variety is concerned is diversity of mood. He paints his Connecticut home, a little cottage in a fold of the hills, in the most sharply contrasted seasons and aspects, and always exerts from the theme a new and lovely charm. The three studies of this subject could not exhibit it under more clearly differentiated conditions nor could they illustrate three more individualized modes of approach. In the "Greenwich Hills in Winter" the house is almost smothered in snow, and the essence of the picture lies in the modulation of gray-white masses—a triumph of values. In "From the Upper Terrace" it is the opulence of color, brought into an exquisite harmony through the play of sunny light, that counts. Here Twachtman is the simple poet, where, in the winter scene, he is



ABBOTT H. THAYER

—From the portrait by Gladys Thayer, at the Knoedler Gallery.



RAPHAEL PUMPELLY

—From the portrait by Gladys Thayer, at the Knoedler Gallery.

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tributors who take their responsibility a shade more seriously inasmuch as they expend more time and paint, upon their "pictures," but this, after all, is no criterion. A work of art is not to be estimated according to the bill which the painter has run up at the color man's. Mr. Manigault and Mr. Maurer and Mr. Walt Kuhn may be as lavish of their materials as they choose, but since they have nothing to communicate that is of interest, and no technical virtues to exploit, we find them as tiresome as Mr. Sheeler and his barns.

Scattered through the mass there are a few things which set us to thinking upon what the artists concerned have missed. There is Mr. Henry L. McFee, with his little "Landscape," his sole contribution. He has, we suspect, a feeling for the beauty in sylvan places, a feeling for the atmosphere as it disturbs the immobility of thick leafage. Why, we wonder, does he not settle down to master his craft and then paint some fine pictures? Then there is the decorative instinct which must harbor somewhere in the make-up of Mr. Maurice B. Prendergast. What a pity that it should be lost in the spotty, woolly method he affects! And Mr. Arthur B. Davies, whom we can never quite get used to as a voyager in this gallery; how puzzling he is in his two nudes! The poet in him survives long enough to provide the canvases with such titles as "Proserpina" and "Air, Light and Wave." But he is not a poet as he wrestles with his questions of form, he is just a "mod-

ernist," modelling his obscure subjects in cholera morbus hues to satisfy some queer theory of his own, and in the long run achieving little more than to revert to Mr. Sheeler—a barn-like ineptitude.

Calendar of Exhibitions

American Art Galleries, Madison Square South—Sterling and Ames collections of modern paintings, to January 17.
Anderson Galleries, Park Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street—Curtis collection of Chinese and Japanese objects of art, to January 18.
Babcock Galleries, 19 East Forty-ninth Street—Taos paintings, to January 28.
Daniel Gallery, 2 West Forty-seventh Street—Pictures by Marsden Hartley, to January 28.
Durand-Ruel, 12 East Fifty-seventh Street—Paintings by Canals, to January 22.
Ferargil Gallery, 24 East Forty-ninth Street—Oils by John Folinsbee, to February 1.
McDowell Club, 108 West Fifty-fifth Street—Modern paintings by American artists.
Hotel Majestic, Central Park West at Seventy-second Street—Paintings by Carlton Fowler, to February 5.
Kleinberger Galleries, 725 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by Jan V. Chelminski, to January 31.
Knoedler Galleries, 556 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by Gladys Thayer, to January 17.
Macbeth Galleries, 450 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by John H. Twachtman, to January 29.
Montross Gallery, 550 Fifth Avenue—Modern American artists, to January 25.
Ralston Galleries, 567 Fifth Avenue—French and English prints, to January 29.
Touchstone Galleries, 118 East Thirtieth Street—Works by four Provincetown painters, to January 18.
D. B. Butler & Co., 601 Madison Avenue—Decorative paintings, etchings and mezzotints by contemporary artists, to January 31.

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